

THE SANSKRIT THEATRE IN ORISSA

A choronological review

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In the past Orissa was a great seat of Sanskrit learning. Puri, which was at that time known as Srikshetra, because of its importance as one of the four sacred places of pilgrimage in India was the special home of Sanskrit poets, dramatists, philosophers and erudite scholars. Religious leaders, scholars and learned writers from various parts of the country assembled here for discourses and the dissemination of their knowledge. This helped the local scholars to enrich themselves with new knowledge and ideas and to produce works of unique profundity. Under the patronage of emperors, kings and noble chieftains the writers of Orissa contributed richly to the field of Sanskrit learning in India. Among their contributions are the *Geeta Govinda* by Jayadeva, *Sahitya Darpana* by Viswanath Kabiraj Mahapatra, *Ekavali* by Kavi Vidyadhar, *Siddhanta Darpana* by Samanta Chandra Sekhar and *Arya Saptasati* by Gobardhana Acharya. Besides these famous works, we find many valuable texts on religion, philosophy, medicine, rhetoric, poetics, mathematics, astronomy, dance, drama, music sculpture, architecture, literature, war, archery written by profound scholars under the impact of Brahmanic culture.

The Sanskrit plays written in Orissa provide ample evidence of a classical theatre which developed in the premises of the Jagannath temple at Puri. It was a signal honour and recognition for a playwright to have his play enacted before the king and the learned pundits. There was a body of Sanskrit pundits attached to the shrine who used to judge the merit of the play after witnessing its performance. Records tell us how the playwrights themselves conducted rehearsals of their plays. Some of them had their own drama troupes (*Natya-Mandali*). It was considered such a mark of honour that even emperors and kings who wrote plays hoped to stage their plays in the classical theatre of the Jagannath temple.

There are a number of stone-platforms and pillared-halls with staircases in the campus of the temple. It is difficult to decide which one was used for dramatic performances. Some are of opinion that the *Nat Mandap* (dancing hall) was used for such performances along with the dance of the

devadasis. There is evidence that besides dancing, the *devadasis* also took part in dramatic performances. But their performance was restricted to the temple only. Unfortunately we do not have any record describing the decor, costume and make-up used in the theatre.

The earliest play written in Sanskrit is assigned to Sri Bhatta Narayana. He probably lived during the first quarter of the 7thC A.D. and received the royal patronage of Madhava Varman of the Sailodbhava dynasty. His play *Veni Sanhara Natakam* is in six-acts. This drama remained popular in Orissa for a considerable period of time. This is surmised because Gajapati Purusottama Deva of Cuttack (1466-1497) wrote *Abhinaba Benisanhara Natakam* in order to eclipse the glory of the earlier work of Bhatta Narayana.

The beginning of 9thC marks a great event in the religious and cultural history of Orissa. During this period the great Sankaracharya, in the course of his spiritual conquest of India came to Puri (820 A.D.) and established a centre of religious theology (*Gobardhanapitha*) which is still in existence. During his stay at Puri there occurred a great movement for the revival of Sanskrit learning and literature in this area. In this age of revival the famous play *Anargha Raghava* was written by Sri Murari Misra and was staged before an enlightened audience at the time of a festival of God Purusottama (Jagannath) as evident from the speech of the *sutradhara* quoted below,

त्रिभुवनमौलिमण्डनमहानीलमणेः कमलाकुचकलस कस्तुरिकापत्राङ्कुरस्य भगवतः पुरुषोत्तमस्य
यात्रायामुपस्थानीया सभासदः (प्रथमोऽङ्कः)

In this connection it may be stated that all the three plays of Bhavabhuti e.g. *Malati Madhava*, *Mahavira Charitam* and *Uttara Rama Charitam* were staged during the festival of God Kalapriyanath, who has been rightly identified with Shiva of that name whose temple existed in Kanya-Kubja, the capital of Yosovarman. Similarly Murari, who wrote *Anargha Raghava Natakam* in imitation of *Mahavira Charitam* of Bhavabhuti, held a performance at the time of the *yatra* (car-festival) of god Purusottam-Jagannath who must have been the family deity of his royal patron, whose name remains yet to be discovered.

Anargha Raghava is a बृहन्नाटकम् i.e. a major drama consisting of seven acts where the whole of the *Ramayana* has been depicted. Most probably this work used to be enacted for several consecutive nights as it is not possible to do so in one night. It appears that the drama remained popular for a considerable period of time. A number of palm-leaf manuscripts of this drama copied in different centuries have been found from different parts of Orissa and some of them are with detailed commentary.

The next important work is the *Probodha Chandrodaya Natakam* by Krishna Misra. From the prologue of this drama it is learnt that it was written and staged in the palace of Raja Kirtivarman to commemorate his victory over the Chedi King, Karna, identified with Laxmikarna (1041-1070 A.D.). The theme of the play revolves round Vedantic philosophy and its characters are allegorical such as *Daya* (compassion) *kshama* (forgiveness) etc.

We find a palm-leaf manuscript of a farce entitled *Hasyarnaba* (the Ocean of Laughter) written by Sankhadhara. The play has

four acts. In the introductory portion, the author calls himself Jagadiswara. At the end of the last act the work is called *Natak melakam* in Sanskrit and *Hasyarnaba* in Oriya. Some are of opinion that *Natak melakam* is a two-act drama different from *Hasyarnaba* by the same author. The author acknowledges the patronage of Ranaranga Malla Govinda Deva who was a great scholar and also the chief minister of Anangabhimha Deva II (1290-1298 A.D.) of the Ganga dynasty of Orissa. The play deals with a social theme and accordingly all the characters are types from society. It strictly conforms to the rules prescribed for a farce in Sanskrit poetics and was held in high esteem by later rhetoricians.

No play has yet been found, written in 14th century as it witnessed the transition of power from the Gangas to the Gajapatis. In the 15th and 16th centuries Orissa reached the zenith of its glory under the Gajapati kings. This period witnessed the greatest expansion of the kingdom. The Gajapati kings were not only great conquerors but also writers, scholars and patrons of letters. This period was marked by the first renaissance in Oriya literature. Though they themselves were writers and patrons of Sanskrit literature, the Gajapati kings also patronised Oriya literature and helped it to develop as it was long looked down upon by the Brahmins as a Prakrit language. Great religious epics were now translated into Oriya for the benefit of the masses.

The beginning of the 15thC saw one of the brilliant personalities in the field of Sanskrit learning. He was Kabiraj Viswanath Mahapatra who earned a countrywide reputation as the author of *Sahitya Darpana*, the most celebrated work on Sanskrit poetics. His knowledge was not confined to rhetorics only. He also earned fame as a poet and dramatist of high order. He adorned the court of Narasinha-IV (1378-1407) in whose honour he wrote *Narasinha Vijaya Natakam*. He also served as minister for peace and war. Later he adorned the court of Nisanka Bhanudev-IV (1407-1434 A.D.). As evident from the dialogue of the *sutradhara* in *Chandrakala Natika*, this play was staged in the presence of Gajapati Nisanka Bhanudev before an assembly of learned scholars after his glorious return to the capital from the conquest of Gauda or Bengal. From his citation in the *Sahitya Darpana* it is learnt that Biswanath wrote another play *Prabhavtai Parinayam* which has not yet been traced.

Gopinath Sandhi Bigrhik was a minister of Gajapati Narasinha-IV. According to the custom of the time generally reputed scholars used to be appointed as ministers for peace and war and as such, Gopinath himself was a scholar and dramatist. He wrote the drama *Parijat Haran Natkam*. There is no evidence of its being staged any where. The authorship of a *vyayoga* entitled *Parsuram Vijaya* is attributed to Gajapati Kapilendra Deva, the greatest among the Hindu kings of Orissa.

“सूत्रधरः - अलमतिविस्तरेण, त्रिभुवनो-दिताऽप्रतिम-प्रताप समुदित
वीरलक्ष्मीस्वयम्बरेण राजाधिराज नवकोटिकर्णाटाधिपति गजपति गौडेश्वर प्रतापवीर कपि-
लेन्द्रदेव महाराजेन नीलकन्दरनाथस्य महोत्सव सभासदः’ मत्काव्याभिनयेनाद्य विनोदय कुशीलुव” ।

From the above quotation it is clear that this play was staged in the compound of the Jagannath temple at Puri at the time of some festival, the name of which has not been mentioned. There were five benedictory verses in the *mangala charan* of this small drama. The dramatist solicits

the blessings of Vishnu, Jagannath, Rukmini, Krishna and Shiva which breathes the religious liberality of this great monarch.

The drama *Parsuram Vijaya* describes how Parasuram killed Kartyaviryarjuna. Most interesting is the Oriya song in the play sung by queen 'Chandravadana'. The play was so named not only because of its story, but to give an impression that like the great mythical hero Parasuram, Gajapati Kapilendra displayed his prowess by the conquest of all the chiefs he fought with. So, he was like an incarnation of Parasuram.

This work was written and staged by Kapilendra himself to commemorate his victory over the Muslim forces of the Deccan, which raised him to the zenith of his power and glory near about 1458 A.D.

Though inferior to his father Kapilendra Deva as a warrior, Purusottama Deva excelled him as a poet and dramatist. A number of Sanskrit works are attributed to him. His play *Abhinava Beni Sahara Natakam* describes the pulling of Draupadi's hair by Dushasana. His style of dialogue is simple and powerful and the dramatic action also very effective. The question put by Draupadi to Dushasana has been exactly reproduced in Sanskrit from the Oriya *Mahabharat* of Sarala Das. This play was staged before the assembly of the vassal chiefs on the Mahastami day of the Dussehra festival. In the introductory portion of the play it is stated that the author had also composed *rupakas* like *Ananda Vilas*, *Janaki Pramod* and *Kubalaya-swa*.

Kavichandraraya Dibakara Misra and Kavidindima Jivadeva Acharya were the foremost Sanskrit writers of their age, who adorned the courts of Gajapati Purusottama and his son Gajapati Prataprudra, respectively. Like his father, Prataprudra was also a highly cultured ruler and a great patron of learning. He is said to have written a number of works in Sanskrit. Dibakara Misra was born in a family of learned scholars famous for their poetic talent and mastery over six *vedangas* and six *darshanas*. This Brahmin family had the credit of contributing more than a hundred works in Sanskrit. Dibakara wrote two plays, *Parijata Haranam* and *Pravabati Natakam*. The *Pravabati natakam* describes the love and marriage of Prabhavati, daughter of Bajranava and Pradyumna, son of lord Krishna. Though there is no evidence of the staging of these plays, it is presumed that these might have been enacted according to the early tradition. Dibakara, after the death of Purusottama went to Vijayanagara to adorn the court of Krishna Deva Ray and later he returned to Orissa to receive the patronage of Prataparudra who held him in high esteem.

Kavidindima Jivadeva Acharya in the early years of the 16th Century received the royal patronage of Prataprudra Dev. He was the most profound scholar and writer of his time and was honoured with the title of *Kavidindima*. He is credited with having written two plays *Bhakti Baibhaba Natakam* and *Utsahavati*, both of which were staged in the premises of the Jagannath temple. *Bhakti Baibhaba Natakam* is an allegorical drama in nine acts like the 'प्रबोधचन्द्रोदयनाटकम्' of Krishna Misra where attempts have been made to prove the excellence of *bhakti* or devotion to god Krishna by means of purely personified abstractions. It was staged in the compound of the Jagannath temple at the time of *Dol Yatra* (Spring-festival) as described below:

दोलामहोत्सवकते पुरुषोत्तमस्य

कोलाहलैः पिकगिरां ध्वनयन दिगन्तान्

लोलालकाद वहलकुञ्जमधूलिसिक्त -

चेलाञ्चल द्विजपटैर्मधुसज्जिहीते "

His *Utsahavati* a *rupaka* was staged in the *Mani Mandap*—a pillared hall bedecked with jewels standing near the Jagannath temple—in the spring season, most probably at the time of the *Dola Yatra* festival like his other drama discussed before,

अस्मिन् वसन्तसमये पुरुषोत्तमस्य
प्रासादपाश्र्वं मणिमण्डयमण्डलीषु ।
एते हरन्ति हृदयनि महाजनानां
नानाविधैरभिनयै रसिका नरेन्द्राः ? '

The drama narrates how the sacrificial horse of Maharaj Yudhisthira, which was being led by Arjuna, the great hero, was stopped by Utsahavati, the heroine with whom a fight ensued. But due to the mediation of lord Krishna and sage Narada, the fight was amicably settled ending in marriage between the hero and the heroine.

The period of Gajapati Prataprudra Deva (1497-1533 A.D.) was a flourishing period in the field of dance, drama and music in Orissa. A number of plays were written in this age. Ray Ramananda Pattanaik was the most respected man of the time for his impeccable knowledge and learning in the fields of philosophy, literature, dance, drama and music. Besides being a man of high histrionic talents, he was an able administrator and a great savant of Vaishnava philosophy for which he was held in high esteem by Sri Chaitanya. He wrote the drama *Jagannath Vallabha Natakam* or *Ramananda Sangita Natakam* at the bidding of his patron Prataparudra Dev who was also a devout Vaishnava. The play in five acts depicts the immortal love-play of Radha and Krishna. This was staged in the premises of the Jagannath temple and the *Devadasis* to Prataprudra Deva:

लघु तरलित-कन्दरं रसित-नव-सुन्दरं
गजपतिप्रतापरुद्रहृदयागतमनुदीनम्
सरसं रचयति रामानन्दरायः "

The five acts of the drama were named *Purva raga*, *Bhava Parikshya*, *Bhaba prakash*, *Sri Radhavisar* and *Radha Krishna sangam*. The characters depicted in it are Sri Krishna, Vidushak, Aristasura, Radha and the gopis Pujiyadamanika, Ashokamanjari, Madhuri, Sashimukhi etc. This play was written prior to the arrival of Sri Chaitanya in Orissa (1509) and the songs followed to a great extent the sweet, simple and melodious rhythmic pattern of Jayadeva in *Geeta Govinda* which can be clearly observed in the following verses,

कलयति नयनं दिशा दिशि वलितं
पङ्कजमिव मृदु मास्त - चलितं
केलि विपिनं प्रनिशति राधा
प्रतिपद समुदित मनसिज बाधा ' (ध्रुः)
निनिदधती मृदु मन्यरयादं
रचयति कुञ्ज रगति अनुनादं
जनयतु रुद्रगजाधिपमुदितं
रामानन्दराय कविगदितम्

विदलित-सरसिज दलचय चयने
 वारित सकल सरबीजन नयने ।
 वलित मनो मम सत्वर रचने
 पूरय काममिमं शशि-वदने ॥
 अभिनव विस किसलय चय वलये
 मलयज रस परिसेवित निलये
 सुखयतु रुद्रगजाधिपचित्तं
 रामानन्द कनि भणितम् ।

This play was again staged before Sri Chaitanya and his followers as ardently desired by them. The drama included a number of dances and songs for which it was called *sangeeta nataka*. Ray Ramananda was himself an exponent of dance and music and used to impart rigorous training to the *devadasis* in these arts. His mode of teaching has been elaborately described in *Sri Krishna Charitamrita* of Kaviraj Goswami. Madhavi Dasi the sister of Ray Ramananda who was also an ardent follower of Sri Chaitanya wrote a play, *Sri Purusottama* along with a number of devotional songs.

Jayadeva-II, the son of the famous Kavidindima Jivadeva Acharya was a leading poet and dramatist of his time. He wrote a one-act play *Piyusha lahari* on the dalliance of Radha and Krishna in the spring season *Basant ras*. This work was staged in the compound of the Jagannath temple at Puri as the two works of his father,

अहो भगवतो भागवतजन शीतमयूरवस्य नीलाचलमौलिमण्डनमणे : गरुडध्वजस्य
 प्रासादे प्रसादमिलिताः सामाजिकाः

From a verse quoted by the author we come to know that he had his own drama-troupe and the play was staged by them. So far we don't find any playwright having his own troupe for the performance of their plays. Jayadeva mentions, "गोष्ठी श्री जयदेव पण्डितमणेः सा वर्तते नर्तितुम्" He also wrote another play *Vaishnavamrutam* the theme of which also revolves round the divine sports of Radha and Krishna. Though there is no mention of its being staged any where, it is believed when the author had his own troupe, it must have been staged. The works are ascribed to the period 1525-1535 A.D.

The Gajapati rulers not only patronised the local scholars and writers, their love for learning and liberal patronage attracted many poets and scholars from the neighbouring kingdoms. Two eminent scholars from Bengal, Sri Basudeva Sarbabhauma and Paramananda Dasa Kavi Karnapura received the royal patronage and lived at Puri. Kavi Kanapura became famous by writing the *Chaitanya Chandrodaya Natakam* which was composed and staged at the time of the car-festival of lord Jagannath at the bidding of Gajapati Prataprudra Deva who was grief stricken at the passing away of Sri Chaitanya.

.....भूताभिलाषेण गजपतिना प्रतापरुद्रेणा-दिष्टोऽस्मिभगवतोऽवतो
 निज करुणां श्रीकृष्ण-चैतन्यस्य प्रियपार्षदस्य शिवानन्द सेनस्य तनुजेन निमित्तं परमानन्द

दास काविना विनाशित हृत्कपायतिमिरं श्रीचैतन्य-चन्द्रोदयं नाम नाटकमभिनीय सम्मीदित
हिल्मस्य नृपतेः करिष्यामि(प्रथमोऽङ्कः)

The 17th century is the period of political turmoil in Orissa. During the last quarter of the 16th century, Orissa fell into the hands of Muslim rulers who made repeated attacks on Puri which was at that time one of the greatest centres of Sanskrit learning in India. The well-known scholars, writers and poets left the city with their families and sought refuge in the princely states especially in the southern region, ruled by Kshattriya rulers the vassal-chiefs of the Gajapati kings. They carried with them the deep impression of Vaishnavism which had cast a tremendous influence on the life and culture of the people of Puri during the stay of Sri Chaitanya. Therefore, the literature they created under the the patronage of the petty rulers embodied the *leela* of Radha and Krishna whose worship became increasingly popular. This was the special characteristic of Sanskrit and Oriya literature during the 17th and 18th centuries. The importance of Puri as a centre of learning slowly waned because of political unrest. We come to know of a manuscript *Bhanja Mohadaya Natika* by Narasingha Misra which was staged in the town of Puri in the court of Gajapati Balabhadra Deva, a king of the Khurda Kingdom, in the presence of Siva Narayana Bhanja, the ruler of Keonjhar State. The work was written between 1650-1660.

There is a palm leaf manuscript of an unpublished Sanskrit play entitled *Manimala Natika* in the manuscript library of the Orissa state museum. In the introductory portion of the drama the author, Anadi Misra states that he wrote this under the patronage of Narayana Mangaraj, who was a famous subordinate of the king of Utkal. The work is assigned to 1688.

The work in four-acts named *Bhabani Bhavan*, *Kanaka Nauka Barnamala* and *Kanaka Rath* depicts a fictitious story of love and marriage between Sringara sringa, a prince of Ujjain and Manimala a princess of Puskara Island. As the cult of tantrism gained ground in that age, the author has introduced *yoginis* as characters who worked miracles to unite the lovers.

A manuscript of a play *Madhuraniruddha Nataka* written by Chayani Chandrasekhara Rayaguru is noticed in the manuscript library of the Orissa state museum. This work in eight-acts is written in a pedantic, verbose and ornamental style in which the author, who took pride in his poetic talent has tried to display his mastery over the Sanskrit language. The author lived in the first half of the eighteenth century and wrote this play in about 1736 A.D. when Gajapati Verakishore Dev-I ascended the throne of Khurda. The play perhaps was never staged, a long work with eight acts with literary verbosity was merely a product to prove the author's literary eminence.

Kavibhusana Govinda Samantaray, a learned scholar and poet of his time wrote *Sammruddha Madhaba Natakam* on the model of the *Geeta Govinda* of Jayadeva and in imitation of the famous Sanskrit drama, *Bidagdha Madhava* written by Rupa Goswami in the middle of the 16th century. From the text of the play quoted by the learned scholar, it appears that this work in seven acts depicting the spiritual love between Radha and Krishna was staged in Nilachala or Puri before an assembly of

learned pundits in the temple of Jagannath. Kavibhusana Govinda flourished in the state of Banki in the district of Cuttack in the middle of the eighteenth century when Virakeshari Deva was the ruler of Khurda.

Kaviratna Purohita Sadasiva Udgata is known as the author of a *rupaka* named *Pramudita Govinda Natakam*. This play in six acts was written in imitation of the famous *Geeta Govinda* of Jayadeva. The author flourished in the court of the ruler of Dharakote, an estate in the district of Ganjam and is assigned to the eighteenth century. It is believed that the work must have been staged as in the eighteenth century the works depicting the *leela* or divine sports of Sri Radha and Krishna were gaining approbation in every royal court.

Kavivar Nilkantha was the author of the *Bhanja Mohodayam*, an historical drama. Though not a play in the real sense it supplies ample material for the history of Orissa in the eighteenth century. It is written in the form of a dialogue between two *yakshas* named *Ananga Kalebara* and *Priyambada* who, being cursed by Kubera, came from heaven to this holy land of Bharata varsha for performing penance for their sin. The two descended near the Gonasika hill, the source of the holy Vaitarani river, and visited all the holy places on its bank. In the course of their conversation the author has narrated the history of the Keonjhar State through which this sacred river flows from early times up to the time of his patron Bala-bhadra Bhanja 1764-1792 A.D.

These are the major plays written for the Sanskrit theatre of Orissa, within a period of nearly one thousand years, that are still extant.